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How Sick Is Yuri Andropov?

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The old man's left hand trembles noticeably. Or maybe it's his right hand; other reports say the left hand appears "numb and stiff." His shuffling walk suggests infirmity, but then a foreign visitor can emerge from a tête-à-tête calling him alert and vigorous. That calm expression: does it reflect the cool of a clever negotiator—or another symptom of Parkinson's disease? And those disappearances: has he slipped off to a *dacha*—or to a hospital for kidney dialysis? Taking the evidence as a whole, the patient obviously suffers from heart disease. Or perhaps diabetes. If only half the health bulletins on Moscow's rumor circuit bear any truth, the wonder is that Yuri Andropov can still get out of bed in the morning.

Without question, Andropov, 69, does not appear to be feeling very well these days. The extent of his ailments are, of course, a state secret. But after a major reassessment of the Soviet leader's health, U.S. intelligence officials now endorse a guardedly optimistic prognosis. They have concluded that Andropov does not suffer from any major nerve diseases or cancer. They have also ruled out a serious kidney ailment requiring dialysis—although many Kremlin watchers in Moscow believe evidence to the contrary. One of the Soviet leader's main complaints appears to be a heart illness dating back at least to the 1960s. His treatment, a senior U.S. intelligence official told NEWSWEEK, probably includes an American-made pacemaker. The study's overall conclusion: Andropov is indeed a sick man who does not wear his years as well as Ronald Reagan. But "according to our actuarial tables," says the intelligence source, "Yuri Andropov is going to be around for a while."

The intelligence analysts concede that their medical chart on Andropov is far from complete. Western diplomats and journalists in Moscow must diagnose his maladies from what they see of him on television and hear from the foreign leaders who meet him in person. Intelligence services also debrief visitors, analyze photos and process any useful tidbit of evidence. For example, they monitor Soviet orders for foreign medical supplies. The stakes riding on an accurate diagnosis are high—especially when the Reagan administration is considering a U.S.-Soviet summit meeting. "You naturally don't want to be bargaining with someone who's not going to be around very long," says the U.S. intelligence official.

Tremors: The latest alarm rang in Moscow earlier this month when Andropov missed two scheduled appointments with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. "I was sick," he told Kohl when he finally showed up for the third. Once the session began, Andropov appeared mentally alert, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher told his allies in Washington last week. The Soviet leader spoke without notes and acted very much like the man in charge. But in Washington, a team of doctors employed by U.S. intelligence began working on their urgent reassessment of the Soviet leader's health. A videotape study showed that Andropov's hands trembled when he used them—a common problem for older people—not when he rested them. The conclusion was that the tremors did not indicate Parkinson's disease. The analysts also ruled out Alzheimer's disease and Hodgkin's disease. In addition, he did not appear to restrict his consumption of sugar as a diabetic would. Nor was there any evidence that Andropov consistently used medicinal drugs that might hamper his powers of thought or speech.

More controversial, the U.S. team concluded that the pattern of Andropov's public appearances argued against any major kidney disease; he drops from sight often, but dialysis treatment would require more regular absences. That finding contradicted persistent rumors in Moscow—some originating from a medical source with contacts among Andropov's physicians—that the prominent patient suffered from serious kidney problems. After his no-show appointments with Kohl, West Germans in the chancellor's party had even spread private Soviet reports that Andropov had passed a kidney stone—a version that U.S. intelligence says could be plausible.

The evidence that Andropov has serious heart problems—complicated by high blood pressure—is much better established. He has had at least two heart attacks, the second in 1966. And the Soviet leader himself disclosed that he has an American-made pacemaker. Andropov mentioned the device during a meeting with a Western delegation, according to the U.S. intelligence source. Somebody in the delegation mentioned Minneapolis; Andropov tapped his chest and said he "knew about Minneapolis." A Minneapolis firm, Medtronic, Inc., supplied